



The spirit of rock-and-roll: Little Richard and an unidentified tenor saxophonist, rocking. *Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives*



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A Tale of Two Cities

MEMPHIS ROCK AND NEW ORLEANS ROLL

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P R E F A C E

Robert Palmer was Senior Research Fellow of the Institute for Studies in American Music in the spring of 1978. In addition to his research and writing under the fellowship and directing a seminar on "The Roots of Rock-and-Roll," Mr. Palmer delivered a pair of public lectures titled as is the present monograph. (He read them at Brooklyn College on 6 April and 13 April.) He has revised the lectures for publication and has added photographs, many of which are here published for the first time.

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H. Wiley Hitchcock, Director
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INTRODUCTION

Before the coming of radio, records, and subsequent refinements in electronic media, music in America was largely an at-home phenomenon. Regions, counties, towns, and even neighborhoods developed their own musical personalities. Radio and records, however, made it possible for a Georgia bluesman to hear what the Texans were up to, for country people to hear city jazz, and so on, and there began a long and complicated process of homogenization that has tended to result in the blurring and in some cases the virtual obliteration of regional and local stylistic distinctions. But the coming of "the media," rapid as it was even in the more remote rural areas, did not immediately wipe out all traces of regionalism. In fact, as late as the 1950s, a music as commercial as rock-and-roll developed largely along regional lines.

This monograph focuses on the contributions of Memphis and New Orleans, the most important Southern recording centers in the transition from rhythm-and-blues and country-and-western music—two popular idioms identified with particular racial and socioeconomic groups—to rock-and-roll, a phenomenon that cut across existing racial and musical barriers. It will address itself to some larger questions as well. Just what is rock-and-roll, and how does it differ from black rhythm-and-blues and white country music? What are some of the factors that made music in Memphis and music in New Orleans so different, even in the rock-and-roll era? The title of the monograph is not entirely facetious, for while early Memphis rock-and-roll tended to have a steady rocking beat, New Orleans had more of a lilting roll.

Rock-and-roll can be broadly defined as an American musical and behavioral style that crystallized in the mid-fifties. Behaviorally, it was most heavily influenced by some Hollywood image-making of the period—Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blackboard Jungle*—and by the immense economic clout that the children of the World War II baby boom enjoyed as they entered their teen-age years. The teen-agers of the mid-fifties had money and mobility, and certain Hollywood films provided role models that seemed more attractive than the sober advice of Mom and Dad.

A certain musical style—rock-and-roll—became associated with these new role models and soon began to provide even more potent ones. The film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) featured Bill Haley's recording of "Rock Around The Clock," played ominously loud under the credits. Haley, a roly-poly country-and-western singer, was not featured in the movie; it was the music, a Tin Pan Alley concoction based on and performed in an approximation of contemporary black popular styles, that made an impact. Within a year or two, star quality was beginning to eclipse musical values. Elvis Presley, whose early records achieved a singularly creative black-white fusion, was able to sing bland pop ballads without tarnishing his image as a rock-and-roller; to his fans he *was* rock-and-roll, whatever he sang.

Musically, rock-and-roll can be seen in several ways. One often reads that it developed out of rhythm-and-blues, which was a euphemism for black popular music, and country-and-western music, which was a euphemism for the popular music of Southern agrarian whites and, to an ever-increasing extent, of lower-class and lower middle-class American whites in general. And one often reads that this or that performer "invented" rock-and-roll. Various black artists are credited with the invention because of particular stylistic breakthroughs they accomplished, and Elvis Presley is often credited with it because he popularized rock-and-roll so widely and so immediately through the medium of national television.

The major premise of the present essay is that the musical and social climate of the mid-fifties made rock-and-roll inevitable. Presley, a hip-wriggling country singer with an exceptional feeling for black material and black performance styles, certainly gave rock-and-roll focus and captured a massive teen-age audience for it almost literally overnight, but rock-and-roll would have come about anyway. Black rhythm-and-blues, a music whose rhythmic power, expressive richness, and frankness about life in general and sex in particular were almost entirely absent from the mainstream white pop music of the time, was already reaching out toward a broader audience. It is evident from the statements of record executives and from sales figures and other evidence that by the early 1950s white teen-agers were listening to black popular music on the radio and buying black records to dance to. Several years before Elvis Presley made his first record, the most popular radio show among the teen-agers of Memphis was "Red, Hot and Blue." The disc jockey, Dewey Phillips, was white, but the music was black. Alan Freed, the white disc jockey who gave rock-and-roll its name, had been playing black records over Cleveland's WJW since the summer of 1951, and on 21 March 1952 he produced a show at the Cleveland Arena that featured all black artists, drew a racially mixed crowd of around 25,000 teen-agers to a facility that could only accommodate 10,000, and precipitated the first rock-and-roll riot. Nor were Phillips and Freed the first of their kind. Hunter Hancock in Los Angeles and a few other white disc jockeys had been enjoying success spinning rhythm-

and-blues records since the mid-forties.

Musical elements that can be defined with the aid of hindsight as contributing to an emerging rock-and-roll style—rhythmic emphases, guitar and piano patterns, "licks" or signature phrases, approaches to the use of amplification, song lyrics, vocal mannerisms—were already current by 1950 in black popular music and, to a lesser but still considerable extent, white country music. In fact, one can isolate threads of what was eventually to become the fabric of rock-and-roll in the oldest Afro-American religious music—ring shouts, with their steady beat, handclapping, and call-and-response, spirituals with their "I've got a rock, you've got a rock" imagery, an early style of very rhythmic church singing known as "reelin' and rockin'"—and in the earliest blues, in big-band jazz, even in Anglo-American balladry and white pop music.

But there is another aspect to the development of rock-and-roll, a very important regional aspect. Historical, geographic, and personal factors are involved here, and perhaps by concentrating on Memphis—which produced B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and many others—and New Orleans—where Fats Domino and Little Richard made their celebrated rock-and-roll recordings—we can clarify some of these factors.¹

I

NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans, the older of the two cities, is a particularly urbane community whose rich cultural traditions are unique, in America, for their longevity and continuity. New Orleans's present site was an Indian portage near the mouth of the Mississippi River in 1717, when the establishment of the city was proposed by John Law, a land promoter with connections in the French royal court. In February 1718, a shipload of Law's recruits founded New Orleans, which was named for His Royal Highness the Duke of Orleans, Regent of France. A contemporary observer, one Father Charlevoix, took issue with the name, writing, "those who coined the name 'Nouvelle Orléans' must have thought that Orleans was of the feminine gender. But what does it matter? The custom is established, and custom rises above grammar."² Custom would rise above a great many things in New Orleans.

Early New Orleans was a cluster of huts, with ditches for drainage and a levee to keep out the nearby Mississippi, which overflowed its banks every spring. For a while the situation was grim. Frenchmen lured by Law's promises of a tropical paradise found instead huge mosquitoes, mud, disease, pestilence, and hostile Indians. Criminals were brought in from French prisons to do hard labor and in due course became almost as numerous as the voluntary colonists. Slaves were imported, large plantations were established around the city, and although the city itself continued to have its problems—disastrous plagues, floods, lawlessness—the plantations began to prosper. And inevitably, with its strategic position at the mouth of the great river, the city prospered too.

"It is probable that New Orleans was neither better nor worse than other settlements in early colonial America," wrote Lyle Saxon; "But it was different. One must remember that there were no Quakers, no Puritans in New Orleans. These were Latins and they brought with them their Latin frankness as to eating and drinking and as to matters pertaining to sex."³ Most importantly for our purposes, music—at least, secular and especially dance music—was more vital to these settlers than it was to Protestant colonists. By the

time the city and the surrounding territory had been ceded to Spain, reclaimed by France, and then sold outright to the fledgling United States in 1803, an established musical culture was thriving. The populace engaged in ballroom dancing to an extent and with an abandon that Yankees found unbelievable. A fine theater had been built in 1792, toward the end of the Spanish period, and by 1796 opera was regularly presented there. An orchestra and numerous smaller ensembles were in evidence; some of the musicians had come from France, others were natives of the city who had been educated overseas, and more and more were trained in New Orleans itself.

Even more important was the French and Spanish attitude toward slaves, and particularly toward African music. The black folk music of the French and Spanish Caribbean and Latin America is much more heavily African than that of North America, especially in its use of African instrumentation, rhythms, linguistic survivals, and ritual elements. New Orleans followed this French and Spanish pattern. Slave gatherings at which Africans were allowed to congregate according to their tribal origins and to play instruments, sing songs, and dance dances of their own were **outlawed in Protestant North America** due to their apparent connection with slave uprisings, **but in New Orleans they continued to be tolerated.** The Yankees who arrived in and **after 1803 and found the slaves congregating every Sunday in Congo Square** could hardly believe their eyes and ears. Some attempts were made to stop the practice, but tradition prevailed. The Sunday gatherings were officially re-established in 1845 and continued up to the eve of the Civil War.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this crucial difference between New Orleans and the rest of North America. A very strong African musical presence remains in the city even today, coloring its folk and popular music. One of the ways this presence has survived is in the music of the so-called **Mardi Gras Indians, black carnival societies that name themselves after fanciful Indian tribes—the Yellow Pocahontas, the Wild Tchopitoulas, the Wild Magnolias—and parade through New Orleans's black neighborhoods in colorful carnival costumes every Mardi Gras. These tribes have existed at least since the 1870s, and although they are now organized largely along neighborhood lines, it is possible that in the beginning they represented a survival of the traditional African tribal affiliations that continued to be observed in Congo Square.**

The Indians' music, which one can hear in the city's black neighborhoods on weekend afternoons for months before Mardi Gras, is some of the most purely African folk music to be found in North America. Polyrythms are established by tambourines, bottles played with combs, and other home-made percussion instruments. A song leader calls out traditional verses, some of which are in a mixture of French and English, with possibly some African words, and a chorus responds with a fixed unison refrain. People dance to

this music in a recognizably African manner, backs arched, knees bent, arms out to the side flapping rhythmically like a bird's wings. This tradition has affected New Orleans's black music profoundly and fundamentally. One of the more popular "Indian" chants, "Two-Way-Pak-E-Way," was recorded by Jelly Roll Morton for the Library of Congress and found its way into the repertoires of many marching bands. Indian chants were turned into rhythm-and-blues hits by Sugarboy Crawford and his Cane Cutters ("Jock-O-Mo," 1954) and the Dixie Cups ("Iko Iko," 1964), among others.

Jazz is the other native New Orleans music of importance to our study. In recent years the designation of New Orleans as the unique birthplace of jazz has been called into question, but it is indisputable that the most influential musicians in the earliest period of jazz were all New Orleans men—Jelly Roll, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet. Armstrong and his Hot Five transformed jazz from a collective music, which it had been in New Orleans, into a music dominated by improvising soloists, but Armstrong was neither the first nor the last of the line of great New Orleans trumpet players. The line began, as far as we know, with Buddy Bolden, and it continued right on down to the most important musician in New Orleans's post-World War II rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll, Dave Bartholomew.

As Jack Buerkle's sociological study *Bourbon Street Black* shows, music runs in families in black New Orleans. Most of the musicians come from musical families, and in part this seems to be a carry-over from the family trade guild system that first flourished under the French. Bartholomew is no exception. He was born in Edgard, Louisiana, about forty miles from New Orleans, on 24 December 1920. His father was a well-known New Orleans jazz tuba player, and Dave attended high school in New Orleans, learning trumpet from one of Louis Armstrong's teachers before striking out on his own. First he played with a brass band in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, and then, beginning around 1939, he worked on Mississippi riverboats. So his musical background was entirely in the New Orleans jazz tradition. After Army service during World War II, a period during which he learned to write and arrange music, he formed his own band. The group followed the style of the times. It was a scaled-down version of the big bands of the swing era (scaled down because of postwar economics), with the rhythm carried by boogie figures in the pianist's left hand, a walking string bass and relatively subtle drumming, and a small brass section riffing behind the featured vocalists, who included Bartholomew himself.

By 1949 the band had become one of the more popular black groups in New Orleans. That year they were performing in a night club in Houston when Lew Chudd, the owner of Imperial Records of Los Angeles, heard them. Chudd and Bartholomew began a fruitful association, with the bandleader's first record, "Country Boy,"⁴ becoming something

of a rhythm-and-blues hit (that is, a hit among black record-buyers). Bartholomew sang his blues about being "a little country boy/running wild in this big old town" over an insistent triadic unison riff that would later figure in an astonishing number of New Orleans rock-and-roll records. His singing was in the Southwestern "shout blues" idiom that was popular at the time because of the recordings of men like Joe Turner and Wynonie Harris, and the walking rhythm sounded Southwestern too. But that saxophone riff was original, and instead of a honking saxophone solo there was a growl-trumpet improvisation by Bartholomew in the purest New Orleans style.

Bartholomew was capable and self-confident, and Lew Chudd was impressed. Soon the bandleader was one of a very few black musicians producing recordings for an important independent record label. He developed a first-class band with a supple, rocking rhythm section, fired by the impeccable drumming of the versatile Earl Palmer, and with at least three exceptional saxophonists. The tenor players, Lee Allen and Herb Hardesty, could honk and scream in the gritty style that was then in favor, but more often they played with a sinuous elegance. Both men were steeped in New Orleans jazz traditions. Hardesty often used Dixieland figurations in his solos, and Allen was not above quoting from the classics. His celebrated improvisation on "Little Liza Jane" by Huey "Piano" Smith and the Clowns (ca. 1958) employs a quote from Dvořák.⁵ The third member of this saxophone triumvirate, which furnished most of the instrumental solos on New Orleans records right up through the early sixties, was baritone (sometimes tenor) saxophonist Alvin "Red" Tyler.

New Orleans had only one professional recording studio, run by a resourceful engineer named Cosimo Matassa, and once word got around that the city was brimming with talent, representatives from the independent record companies that were then the only purveyors of contemporary black popular music (the major companies like Columbia/CBS and RCA Victor concentrating on mainstream pop) began showing up to audition hopefuls. Most of them ended up using Bartholomew's band, which could be depended on to throw together an appropriate backing for a new song in a few minutes, using mostly unison horn riffs and a selection of stock rhythm figures. During the early fifties the Bartholomew band appeared on several hit records, including Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy,"⁶ the number one rhythm-and-blues record of 1952 according to the trade papers *Billboard* and *Cashbox*; it was one of the first rhythm-and-blues hits to attract a significant number of white purchasers.

But even this success was overshadowed by one of Bartholomew's discoveries, a young pianist and singer named Antoine "Fats" Domino. Born in New Orleans on 26 February 1928 into a family that spoke mostly Creole French, Domino learned to play the piano



Lee Allen, whose tenor saxophone solos and breaks on records by Little Richard, Fats Domino, and many lesser lights made him one of the most important early rock-and-roll instrumentalists. Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives



The Fat Man, in a typical 1950s publicity shot—so friendly and reassuring, he kept mom and dad happy while keeping the kids dancing.

from his uncle, Harrison Verrett, who had worked with Papa Celestin, Kid Ory, and other respected New Orleans jazzmen. At the same time, the young Domino was impressed by older New Orleans blues pianists, by the boogie-woogie recordings of pianists like Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons, and by the smooth West Coast rhythm-and-blues of Amos Milburn.

Domino's first record for Imperial was "The Fat Man," produced by Bartholomew, who has said that the loudness of the piano and the harshness of the saxophones on the record were problems resulting from inadequate recording facilities at Matassa's studio.⁷ "The Fat Man" became a national rhythm-and-blues hit, rising as high as number six on the *Billboard* rhythm-and-blues "charts." In 1952 Domino scored his first number *one* rhythm-and-blues hit with "Goin' Home"; by the mid-sixties he had placed 43 single records on the best-seller charts, made 18 gold records, and sold over 30 million discs in all.⁸

It is interesting to follow Domino's recorded output from 1949 through the early sixties, as one can do by listening in order to *The Fats Domino Story*, a series of six LPs on English United Artists.⁹ Bartholomew and Domino wrote most of the material: the rest came from traditional folk sources and from Tin Pan Alley. Songs in the traditional category include "Careless Love," the nineteenth-century ballad and Dixieland standard (1950); "Mardi Gras in New Orleans," a blues made popular by the New Orleans pianist Professor Longhair (1952); "Where Did You Stay?," a black songster ballad recorded by Leadbelly, among many others (1954); another ballad, "Stack and Billy" (1955); "Bo Weevil" (1955); and "When the Saints Go Marching In" (1958). Songs in the Tin Pan Alley category, among which were some of Domino's biggest hits, included "My Blue Heaven" (1955), "When My Dreamboat Comes Home" (1956), "Blueberry Hill" (1956), and "Margie" (1958). During this period, recording techniques changed: the sound on the records became cleaner; the individual instruments were heard more clearly. There were some changes in production values: an occasional use of prominent handclapping (after the mid-fifties), a tendency to move away from blues and blues-based melodies toward melodies with a catchier, more pop-oriented flavor, and, after the late fifties, an occasional use of a vocal chorus and even strings. But to an astonishing degree the style remained unchanged. It was still based on the sound developed by Bartholomew's musicians and by the engineer Cosimo Matassa: heavy drums and bass, rolling piano, a rich mesh of saxophones and trumpet providing both organ-type chords and background riffs, and strong vocal leads. The triad figure that Bartholomew had introduced on "Country Boy" reappeared again and again, now in the saxes, now as a bass pattern for string bass and electric guitar doubling in unison, now in any one of a variety of permutations. And Domino's inimitable singing, with its slightly French pronunciation and apparent insouciance, remained virtually unchanged. In the mid-fifties, Fats Domino easily made the

transition from rhythm-and-blues artist to rock-and-roll star—from a black audience to a largely teen-age, racially mixed audience.

During this time New Orleans was in the forefront of the rock-and-roll explosion. One of the important artists was Smiley Lewis,¹⁰ whose biggest rhythm-and-blues hit, "I Hear You Knocking," was "covered" by the white pop singer Gale Storm in 1955; he made numerous records that were extremely influential in the South, among them "Shame Shame Shame" (1956) and "One Night (Of Sin)" (1955), the latter bowdlerized by Elvis Presley as "One Night (Of Love)". Another was Little Richard, the torch-mouthed screamer of rock-and-roll, who was actually from Macon, Georgia, but who found his mature style in New Orleans in 1955 when he cut "Tutti Frutti," and who continued to make most of **his** records there with Dave Bartholomew's band until 1958, when he abruptly quit rock-and-roll and began studying for the ministry.¹¹ Yet another was Larry Williams, who broke into show business as Lloyd Price's valet and had a string of hits in 1957-59 including "Bony Moronie," "Short Fat Fannie," and "Dizzy Miss Lizzy."¹² Finally, there were Huey "Piano" Smith and the Clowns, who meshed the New Orleans piano and rhythm-section styles with comedy vocal-group antics and produced high-spirited rock-and-roll hits such as "Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu" (1957) and "Don't You Just Know It" (1958).¹³

These were all black artists, and they projected a black sound that was little different from the New Orleans rhythm-and-blues of the early fifties. Dave Bartholomew's band did an astonishing job backing most of them. The group was hard-rocking and slightly crazed on Little Richard's hits, more delicate and melodic behind Fats Domino, more in the early fifties' Texas-California blues-shuffle style behind Smiley Lewis. Rhythmically, New Orleans rock-and-roll records were unfailingly rousing and danceable, and the little eight-bar, twelve-bar, and sixteen-bar saxophone solos, mostly by Allen and Hardesty, were gems of clever construction and quick thinking. The few New Orleans rock-and-roll hits by white artists—which included "See You Later Alligator" by Bobby Charles and "Sea Cruise" by Frankie Ford—followed the dominant black style and usually featured backing by black bands.

But if New Orleans rhythm-and-blues seems to have changed little during the upheaval of the rock-and-roll years, under the surface it was changing dramatically as a result of strong musical influences that were indigenous to the city.

As we have seen, New Orleans retains to this day numerous reminders of the heritage of the African slaves who once danced and drummed in Congo Square. These reminders were not very evident in records like Dave Bartholomew's "Country Boy" or Fats Dom-



Smiley Lewis, the New Orleans blues shouter whose recordings of the early and middle '50s with the Dave Bartholomew Band furnished impetus for the emerging rock-and-roll movement. *Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives*

ino's "The Fat Man," which were close in style to the mainstream of rhythm-and-blues as performed by nationally popular artists like Louis Jordan and Amos Milburn. But all through the period we have been discussing, the African or Afro-Caribbean influence in New Orleans music was resurfacing in the city's rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll. This strain was first evident in the work of Roy Byrd, known as Professor Longhair, who was born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, on 19 December 1918 and was raised in New Orleans. Byrd first played blues guitar, performed in the streets as a tap dancer, and worked out as an orange-crate drummer with a children's band. During the forties he learned blues piano from various barrelhouse players, but at the same time he listened to and played with musicians from the islands (as a port city New Orleans has always maintained ties with the Caribbean) and fell under the spell of Perez Prado's mambo records. He also learned rhythms by following in the "second line" behind parading brass bands. "In those days," he has said, "it was a second *band* in back of the first band. Cats would have buckets, pans, bottles, sticks, pieces of iron, bells. If they could include the sound, they were welcome to join the second line. And they'd actually be getting a better sound with those things than the band would be getting in front, because the band could only play two or three different numbers, mostly hymns. And meanwhile those cats behind would be really ballin' with that junk they had. You can get a good version of that from what the Mardi Gras Indians are singing and playing now."¹⁴

Professor Longhair set the standard eight- and twelve-bar blues to the Afro-Caribbean polyrhythms that were kept alive in New Orleans by the black carnival societies and informal second-liners. The result was a fresh new brand of dance music, and in 1949, when Professor Longhair and his band, the Four Hairs combo, replaced Dave Bartholomew at the popular Caldonia Inn, they became the rage of New Orleans. During the next few years Longhair recorded for Mercury, Atlantic, and Star Talent, scoring a respectable rhythm-and-blues hit with "Bald Head" and making the first of several versions of a song that is still revived every Mardi Gras season, "Go to the Mardi Gras."¹⁵

Conventionally trained musicians respected Longhair, but they often had trouble playing with him. Saxophonist Red Tyler told the English interviewer John Broven that "usually with a trained musician, we have a certain pattern we are going to play, follow a certain normal chord progression, rhythms and things. He would throw them all out the window and we'd go and listen at this guy when we got off of our gigs because it was so different."¹⁶ Actually, there is no evidence on Longhair's recordings of his ignoring barlines or other metrical considerations, but there is considerable evidence, especially on his early Atlantic sides, of the complexity of his cross-rhythms confusing Tyler and other saxophone soloists.



Professor Longhair, described by Allen Toussaint as "the Bach of rock-and-roll," performing at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 1973. Photo courtesy New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival



Huey "Piano" Smith, leader of the Clowns and an important New Orleans piano stylist in the Professor Longhair tradition. *Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives*

During the fifties Professor Longhair was reluctant to leave New Orleans and tour, and although every New Orleans musician was aware of him, few artists put his rhythmic innovations to use, except for an occasional outright copy like Fats Domino's "Mardi Gras in New Orleans." The rock-and-roll audience of the middle and late fifties probably would not have appreciated the Professor's rhythmic subtleties; they wanted "the big beat," and this is what Domino, Little Richard, Larry Williams, and the other New Orleans stars gave them. So Professor Longhair remained largely unknown outside musicians' circles. And even many of the musicians, like Tyler, found him fascinating but difficult to play with.

Longhair had to teach musicians himself. "None of the musicians he used were of the calibre that could sit in with us," said Tyler. (By "us" he meant the studio clique that played on most New Orleans recordings.) "But they worked together hand in glove, they understood each other."¹⁷ Among these musicians was the drummer John Boudreaux, who spent much of the fifties apprenticed to Longhair and who became one of the most prominent New Orleans recording drummers of the early and mid-sixties. At the same time, a new generation of pianists came along, many of whom respected Longhair as a father figure. Among the heavily Longhair-influenced pianists of the late fifties and early sixties were Huey "Piano" Smith, Allen Toussaint (who called Longhair "the Bach of rock-and-roll"), and the white musician Mac Rebennack (Dr. John). When Toussaint began producing records in the early sixties, with Boudreaux as his drummer, the results were more complex rhythmically than the New Orleans rock-and-roll hits of the fifties, more in keeping with the Longhair style and with New Orleans's rhythmic uniqueness. These early Toussaint productions "Mother-In-Law," by Ernie K-Doe, and "Ooh Poo Pah Doo," by Jessie Hill, are good examples—¹⁸ paved the way for the even more rhythmically complex funk sound of the late sixties and early seventies, a sound that was pioneered by Toussaint's earlier productions and carried on by the house band he developed in the late sixties, the Meters.

This survey of developments in New Orleans rhythm-and-blues during the fifties has been necessarily brief, and we have overlooked some popular artists, including the influential blues shouter Roy Brown and the rock-and-roll wild man Esquerita.¹⁹ But the outlines of the story should be clear enough. New Orleans has long been a city that does things in a traditional manner, and in New Orleans music even innovations, like Professor Longhair's, spring from traditional sources. New Orleans recording musicians, artists, and producers did not have to alter their approaches radically to cash in on the rock-and-roll boom of the mid-fifties; at the most they made a few superficial concessions such as adding hand-clapping and vocal choruses, writing catchier melodies, or lending slightly heavier emphasis to the beat. For the most part, New Orleans rhythm-and-blues stars did not even have to change their image to appeal to the rock-and-roll audience. In an era of ducktails, slinky stage movements, and outlandish costumes, an artist like Fats Domino was very much an anomaly, yet he was one of the most successful recording stars of the period.

II

MEMPHIS

Memphis was a different story, and, as one might expect, its early history differs dramatically from that of New Orleans. It was founded as a stopping-place for Mississippi riverboatmen in 1819, when New Orleans already boasted an opera house and orchestra, and at first its inhabitants knew only the fiddle and the banjo.²⁰ Some of the fiddlers and banjoists were undoubtedly slaves, brought by early settlers from Virginia and the Carolinas, and it seems that the whites took a liking to black music early on. In 1838, when the famed Norwegian concert violinist Ole Bull appeared in Memphis as the first important concert artist to perform there, he was greeted coldly, and the reviewer from the *Weekly American Eagle* complained, "If he had only struck up 'Lucy Neal' or 'Buffalo Gals,' and played a nigger fiddle, the Norwegian would have captured our . . . amateurs."²¹

Some of the wilderness around Memphis was settled by small farmers, with a few slaves or none. But large tracts, especially in the Mississippi Delta, were bought by landed gentry from the southeast who came with their families and hundreds of slaves, cleared the land, and established giant plantations. Memphis became the commercial center for the northern part of the Delta, and by the 1850s it was thriving. The most popular entertainments were minstrel shows, which often arrived by Mississippi river steamer. They featured white imitations of blacks and their plantation music, and they were well-attended, but the populace seemed to crave music of almost any sort. In 1851 the town's population was still only 8,800, but 1,000 people turned out for Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale, some paying up to \$30 a ticket. By this time there was ballroom dancing in Memphis, and already there were black musicians, trained in something approximating the European manner, playing for some functions. At the opening of the luxurious, newly renovated Gayoso Hotel in 1858, the ballroom orchestra was black, and since this was the most popular spot in town for visiting planters and other well-to-do whites, we can only assume the musicians played quadrilles, waltzes, and so on. Perhaps they played some hotter music too.

The Civil War was followed by the disastrous yellow fever epidemic of 1878-79, which sent most of the population fleeing to the countryside in panic. In 1879 the town went

bankrupt and had its charter revoked by the state. But during the 1880s Memphis began to rebuild and re-establish itself, and musical life blossomed once again. The Mardi Gras, which had been celebrated much as it was in New Orleans, did not survive the plague, but in the 1880s there were other amusements: brass bands, vaudeville and burlesque entertainments, Mozart and Mendelssohn societies, a Wagner club, a Beethoven club, visiting opera performances, a small orchestra. A large opera house was built in 1889 at the corner of Maine and Beale Streets, in an area then fashionable and white. The first black theater, the Lincoln, was built in the 1890s, when Beale Street was beginning to turn into a regional center of fashionable black night-life.

In 1895 the first Memphis conservatory of music was established, and in the same year a black minister from Lexington, Mississippi, Rev. C. H. Mason, founded the Church of God in Christ, the first and most important of the pentecostal sects that were to revolutionize black religious music. The more traditional churches allowed no instruments, except perhaps a piano or an organ, in worship services; but the pentecostal or sanctified churches allowed trumpets, guitars, drums, virtually any instrument, and they developed a hot, steady-rocking musical style that made an important contribution to rock-and-roll.

W. C. Handy, a trained black band-musician who had played the cornet in minstrel shows and later led a dance band (its musicians able to read music) in Clarksdale, Mississippi, settled in Memphis with his band around 1909. Six years earlier, he had been sitting in a Delta train station when he heard an itinerant black guitarist singing "the weirdest music [he] had ever heard" — the blues. There was plenty of this new black music in Memphis, and Handy listened to the way the untrained guitarists and pianists played it, remembering what he liked, forgetting what he didn't. He began incorporating authentic folk blues in the ragtime-related compositions he was writing, and his "St. Louis Blues" became a nationwide hit. He certainly did not invent the blues, nor was the idiom born in Memphis. But the popularization of the blues began, for all practical purposes, with Handy; it was a Memphis phenomenon.

Throughout the first decades of the century, Memphis was an important blues center. At first, it had no real blues style of its own. Country bluesmen came from Western Tennessee, north-central Mississippi, and the Delta, bringing their diverse regional styles. Western Tennessee blues, as performed by artists like Sleepy John Estes and the members of Gus Cannon's various jug bands, was lilting, gentle, and played on a variety of instruments, including mandolin, jug, piano, and banjo. Its most striking characteristic was an expressive, mournful, crying vocal style, with very liquid and legato phrasing. The music of north Mississippi artists like Frank Stokes and Dan Sane — known collectively as the Beale Street Sheiks — was characterized by strong, declamatory singing (the result of apprentice-

ships served in travelling minstrel or medicine shows, where one learned to project) and driving dance rhythms. Two-guitar teams, with one player strumming chords while the other flatpicked melodic runs, were common (Stokes-Sane, Garfield Akers-Joe Callicott, Allen Shaw-Memphis Willie B.).²²

These were the dominant styles in the late 1920s, when the first commercial recordings of Memphis blues were made. During the thirties and forties, as improved roads and automobiles made travel to and from the rich farmland of the Delta easier, Delta blues became more and more dominant stylistically. It was characterized by very rough and forceful vocals, strong ostinato bass rhythms, and a very narrow melodic range. Often Delta blues sounded like early field chants or hollers set to driving one-chord guitar accompaniments. The percussiveness of the music was further emphasized by many of the guitarists, who would bang on their instruments as if they were drums.²³

The country bluesmen tended to play for tips in the streets, on corners, or in Handy Park. The jug bands, informal groups that played both blues and popular songs, performed in the Park and sometimes for whites at the country clubs. The theaters along Beale Street presented higher-class black entertainment: vaudeville blues singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, jazz bands. One of the sleekest, most progressive big bands of the swing era, the Jimmy Lunceford Orchestra, began in Memphis in the early thirties. During the forties the city was often visited by Louis Jordan, Count Basie, and other name entertainers.

At the same time, Memphis became an important regional center for hillbilly music. During the forties and early fifties, when Nashville had not yet developed as a country-music broadcasting and recording center, Memphis's country radio stations featured frequent live broadcasts by national country stars, among them Hank Williams and the Delmore Brothers. The major styles of country music — old-time hillbilly, the jazzier sound of western swing, honky-tonk music, and the rocking hillbilly boogie that was an important precursor of early white rock-and-roll — all had adherents in Memphis, with most local groups probably imitating nationally known performers and styles.

During this period, Delta blues began changing. With the coming of amplification during the forties, the lowly harmonica became a lead instrument, and the electric guitar became the norm. Influenced in part by the jumping band-blues of Louis Jordan, the South-western blues shouters, and perhaps some of the early New Orleans artists, Delta bluesmen began fronting combos with drummers, amplified guitars and harps, and sometimes saxophones. Some of the most important local bluesmen of the late forties and early fifties included Chester Burnett, better known as Howlin' Wolf, who broadcast over radio

station KWEM in West Memphis; Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) and Elmore James, the influential harmonica player and the slide guitarist, who teamed up for a time; and Riley "Blues Boy" King, who absorbed urbane jump-blues stylings while working as a disc jockey on Memphis's WDIA in the late forties and early fifties and developed a modern blues-guitar sound that was much influenced by the jazzy Texas guitarist T-Bone Walker.

So Memphis was a rich regional music center. Having no long-standing traditions of its own, it welcomed all sorts of music, and all it needed was a catalyst. That catalyst was Sam Phillips (born 5 January 1923), a white radio engineer and disc jockey from Florence, Alabama, who came to Memphis in 1945 and in 1946 landed a job at WREC engineering remote broadcasts by nationally known big bands from atop the posh Peabody Hotel. Phillips had grown up close to black people and enjoyed black music, and in 1950 he opened a modest little studio, the Memphis Recording Service, for the express purpose of recording black talent.

There was plenty of it. The independent record companies that led the way in releasing black music had already begun to visit Memphis; there were no other recording facilities there to speak of, and within six months they were visiting Phillips regularly. At first label-owners like the Bihari brothers of Los Angeles simply rented Phillips's studio to record artists like B. B. King. But Phillips was a capable engineer and had an excellent ear for talent, and soon he was making master recordings himself and leasing them to the Biharis' Modern and RPM labels or to Chess Records in Chicago. In 1951 he recorded his first rhythm-and-blues hit, using a very young band that had driven up from Clarksdale, in the Mississippi Delta, but was playing in a city jump-blues style. The band was named the Kings of Rhythm and was led by a pianist and aspiring guitarist, Ike Turner. Baritone saxophonist Jackie Brenston took the lead vocal on the song "Rocket '88'," which was about cars and girls and had a socking beat. "Rocket '88'" was one of the biggest rhythm-and-blues hits of the year, and because of its theme, its rocking beat, and the fuzzy, over-amplified electric guitar that plays a boogie figure throughout it has often been cited as "the first rock-and-roll record." Actually, it was a clever synthesis of several then-popular urban jump-blues stylings. The guitar sound came about because guitarist Willie Kizart's amplifier had fallen off the top of the car on the drive up from Clarksdale and been damaged; but rather than miss an opportunity to record, Phillips stuffed some paper in the speaker, and everyone liked the sound that resulted. Phillips recalls that it sounded "like a saxophone."²⁴

During the next few years Phillips recorded the cream of the area's blues talent: B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Walter Horton, Joe Hill Louis, Little Milton. Most of these recordings were made for the Modern/RPM or Chess labels, but in 1952 Phillips started his own label, Sun.



Sam Phillips, protean producer, who launched Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash, first recorded B. B. King and Howlin' Wolf, and left an indelible mark on American music, 1978. Photo by Pat Rainer

Early in 1953 Sun scored its first rhythm-and-blues successes with "Bear Cat," an answer to Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's recording of "Hound Dog" by Memphis disc jockey and entertainer Rufus Thomas, and "Feelin' Good," an up-tempo boogie record by bluesman Junior Parker.²⁵ Several of these early Phillips productions are of particular interest to students of rock-and-roll. Dr. Ross the Harmonica Boss, an artist from Tunica, Mississippi, made a record called "My Bebop Gal" that featured novelty lyrics, a rhythmic acoustic guitar, and a catchy melody, predicting some of the rockabilly or white rock-and-roll records of later years.²⁶ Willie Johnson and Pat Hare, two electric guitarists who worked with Howlin' Wolf, Junior Parker, and James Cotton, recorded several fuzzy, super-distorted guitar solos that sound, in retrospect, like the beginnings of "heavy" rock.²⁷ Phillips says that Hare's distorted sound was the result of mismatched impedance between guitar and amplifier, and that rather than substitute better equipment, as producers normally did, he encouraged his artists to use equipment they were used to and felt comfortable with. At a time when most other black records were somewhat polished reflections of what actually took place in performance, Phillips captured the raw sound of country and city juke-joints and taverns.

Phillips made it a point to have long, friendly talks with local distributors, juke-box operators, and other people engaged in disseminating his product. One thing he learned from these conversations was that white teen-agers were listening to black music. He began to feel, he says now, that if he could find a white artist who sang in a more or less black idiom, it would help black artists by making their music more "respectable" and thus broadening its appeal. He denies having made the oft-quoted remark, "If I could find me a white man who sang with the Negro feel, I could make a million dollars," but acknowledges that he did consider the profit-motive in his search for a black-white hybrid.

First he found Harmonica Frank Floyd, a white hobo and medicine-show entertainer who accompanied himself on guitar and harmonica and sang "black," but in a 1930s style. Floyd's records are interesting and exciting in themselves, but they were not what Phillips was looking for.²⁸ Then, sometime early in 1954, a young man named Elvis Aaron Presley, born in Tupelo, Mississippi, on 8 January 1935, walked in off the street to make an acetate disc for his mother. He sang a ballad in the Dean Martin style, but Phillips and his secretary, Marion **Keisker**, were impressed with Elvis's voice. Phillips says he sensed, if only vaguely, great potential.²⁹

Presley had lived in Mississippi until he was thirteen, when his family moved into a low-rent housing project in Memphis. He was an only child, a twin brother having died at birth, and his mother Gladys, who doted on him, bought him his first guitar. Every Sunday, and often during the week, the family attended the Assembly of God Church, a pentecostal



Ike Turner, whose band's "Rocket '88" has been described as "the first rock-and-roll record," in a 1950s publicity shot with wife and vocalist Tina. *Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives*

or sanctified sect in which relatively strong emotional and physical manifestations of the spirit were encouraged. Presley's uninhibited performing style was probably rooted in this church background. He also became an avid follower of white gospel quartets like the Blackwood Brothers. During his teen-age years he heard the same music other lower-class Southern whites heard: pop crooners, country music, and black rhythm-and-blues.

After Presley's initial appearance at the Memphis Recording Service, Sam Phillips began looking for a ballad for him to sing. He found one in Nashville and scheduled a recording session, but it turned out that Elvis had no backing musicians; he was strictly a loner who practiced singing and guitar playing in his bedroom at home. So Phillips called Scotty Moore, guitarist in Doug Poindexter's country band, and sent Presley over to jam with him. They worked on songs by country stars Hank Snow and Eddy Arnold and the black ballad-singer Billy Eckstine. Moore's neighbor, bassist Bill Black, joined them. Over the next six months or so, the trio rehearsed periodically, coming into the studio every once in a while so that Phillips could gauge their progress. He was busy with running his label—he had no staff except Marion Keisker—but he kept telling himself there was something in Elvis, if only he could draw it out.

Several recording sessions with Presley, Moore, and Black ensued, with little success. Then, on 6 July 1954, an exasperated Phillips walked out of the tiny control booth into the studio and said, half-jokingly, "Elvis, ain't there something you know you can sing?" Presley responded by tearing into "That's All Right," a song that Mississippi bluesman Arthur Crudup had recorded in 1946. Moore and Black fell in with him and they were all laughing, not taking the music seriously—except for Phillips. Sam raced back into the control room and told them to do the song again, just that way.

They spent the rest of the session working on a Bill Monroe bluegrass tune, "Blue Moon of Kentucky." When they began, they were giving it a standard country treatment, but, take by take, with Phillips's encouragement, they transformed it into something else, a jumping kind of hillbilly music with a sexy, black-inspired vocal style, percussive slapped bass, stinging electric guitar leads, and a beat—rockabilly.³⁰ Now they had two sides for a record, and Phillips took it to the popular Memphis disc jockey Dewey Phillips (no relation). After the record was released throughout the South, the reaction was mixed, with many disc jockeys and listeners wondering whether the record belonged in a country-music or black rhythm-and-blues format and one jock declaring that Presley was so country he shouldn't be played after 4:00 a.m. But in Memphis the reaction was unequivocal. Dewey Phillips's switchboard was jammed with calls. He had to play the record over and over. After an hour or two of this hysteria, he sent someone out to find Presley, who, oblivious to the fuss, was enjoying a movie. Elvis was fetched from the theater and interviewed on



Elvis Presley at an early performance with his original trio. Right: bassist Bill Black. *Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives*

the air; Dewey Phillips was careful to ask him where he had attended high school, so that his listeners would know Elvis was white.

Between the summer of 1954 and November 1955, when Sam Phillips sold Presley's contract to RCA Victor for \$35,000, Sun released four more singles by Elvis. Each one followed the pattern of "That's All Right"/"Blue Moon of Kentucky" by coupling a driving, blues or rhythm-and-blues side with a country-derived flip side. These recordings are readily available on an RCA album³¹ and constitute a unique body of work, for at this juncture Presley and Phillips were making music that was neither rhythm-and-blues nor country nor pop. It was not really early rock-and-roll, either, for there was no drummer on most of the records and the instruments and voice interacted in a relaxed, liquid manner, with few traces of the aggression or tension that would characterize so many later rock-and-roll hits. Even so, there were plenty of portents. Presley's version of "Milkcow Blues Boogie" began with a slow, sultry introduction and then leaped abruptly into an all-out rocking groove, with Moore playing guitar breaks that would be endlessly copied for years to come. The rock-and-roll hiccup that was to figure so prominently in the singing of Buddy Holly and Gene Vincent, among others, first surfaced in Presley's radical reworking of Arthur Gunter's "Baby, Let's Play House."

Good as the records were, Presley's live shows were more important. Elvis on Sun Records never achieved a national pop hit, and only his last Sun coupling, "Mystery Train"/"I Forgot To Remember To Forget," actually made the country-music charts. But everywhere he went, there was pandemonium. Teen-age girls screamed, fainted, and stormed the stage; when established country stars followed Elvis in a program, they could not sing their hits because the fans were screaming for "more Elvis." Tom Parker, a shrewd Nashville manager, signed Presley to an exclusive contract and engineered a contract with RCA Victor, and with his first RCA single, "Heartbreak Hotel," and a series of national television appearances, Presley became an overnight sensation. He had the rhythmic, rebellious singing style white teen-agers had been waiting for, and his "greaser" image — with the sideburns, the flamboyant clothes — was cleverly exploited.

Sam Phillips had other things on his mind. By the time he sold Presley's contract he already had two up-and-coming stars, Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins. Cash was a new kind of outlaw country singer with a hard voice and spare instrumental back-up. Perkins (born 9 April 1932 on a tenant farm near Tiptonville, Tennessee) was a country boy with a ferocious lead guitar style and a talent for songwriting. He had been making music with his brothers in Jackson, Tennessee, that was somewhat similar to Presley's Sun recordings, although it probably was much closer to the rocking hillbilly boogie that was being turned out by the Delmore Brothers and other black-influenced country artists. At first Phillips

recorded Perkins doing straight country songs, but in December 1955 he recorded two up tempo originals, "Honey Don't" and "Blue Suede Shoes." The latter was inspired by a country teen-ager at a dance who had a new pair of shoes and was very careful not to let anyone step on them. ("When you were as poor as we were, you loved any kind of shoes," Perkins has explained.)³² "Blue Suede Shoes," a flaming performance done in just one take, became the first record to penetrate the upper reaches of all three sales charts — country, pop, and rhythm-and-blues. More than any of Presley's recordings, more than any other record, it made the Sun Records rock-and-roll or rockabilly sound a nationwide sensation. (Sam Phillips prefers to call the music rock-and-roll, feeling that rockabilly "sounds like a Madison Avenue term.")

With "Blue Suede Shoes" approaching number one on the pop charts in March 1956, Perkins was booked to go on the Ed Sullivan and Perry Como network television shows. He and the band left for New York on 22 March, two days before Presley made his final appearance on the relatively low-rated Dorsey Brothers television show. But Perkins was involved in a serious accident in Delaware and required hospitalization for the better part of six months. He watched from his bed when Presley became the first rock-and-roll artist to appear on the Sullivan show, the most popular and prestigious television variety show in the country. And one of the songs Presley sang during his series of Sullivan appearances was "Blue Suede Shoes."

Phillips's next important rock-and-roll artist was Jerry Lee Lewis, who was born on 29 September 1935 in Ferriday, Louisiana, home territory for Little Brother Montgomery and other celebrated blues and barrelhouse pianists. Lewis seems to have heard black music at an early age, along with country-music broadcasts from the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. In 1948, when he was thirteen, he gave a spontaneous performance with a hillbilly band in the parking lot of the local Ford dealer, singing "Drinkin' Wine Spo-de-o-de," a then-current rhythm-and-blues hit. The following year he landed his own weekly radio show in Natchez, Mississippi. He attended a fundamentalist bible school after graduating from high school but was dismissed, reportedly for getting carried away and double-timing his piano accompaniment to "My God Is Real" during a school assembly.

Like Carl Perkins, who sent audition tapes to most of the major record companies with offices in Nashville, Lewis got a cold reception in established country-music circles. He auditioned for Sun in 1956 and did "session" work there at first. His initial Sun single, "Crazy Arms," with his own "End of the Road" on the other side, was a kind of country-rock, already stamped with the pianist/vocalist's brash, unmistakable style. It was a question of finding the right material and the right setting for Lewis, and in April 1957 Phillips



Carl Perkins and band as seen in the 1957 Warner Brothers film "Jamboree."
Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives

recorded him doing "Whole Lotta Shakin' goin' On," backed only by his own barrelhouse piano, Roland Janes on guitar, and James Van Eaton on drums. He then performed the song on the Steve Allen television show, and the record went on to sell some six million copies worldwide. Lewis followed it up in November with "Great Balls of Fire," using an even simpler sound, with only his piano and Van Eaton's drums. Phillips's use of slap-back echo added a remarkable sense of presence and depth to the recording.³³

Phillips went on to record a number of artists who were later to achieve substantial and lasting success in the country music field, among them Roy Orbison, Charlie Rich, Carl Mann, and Conway Twitty. But his rock-and-roll empire was short-lived. Carl Perkins never managed to regain the career momentum he had lost following his accident, and Lewis's career ground to a halt in 1958 due to unfavorable publicity resulting from his marriage to a thirteen-year-old cousin. Despite some late-fifties hits by Rich, Mann, and Bill Justis, Phillips began to feel more and more acutely the pressures entailed in running an independent record company. Sun was only sporadically active through the mid-sixties and, on 1 July 1969, Shelby Singleton of Nashville cemented a deal that gave him control of the Sun catalogue.

Every singer Phillips recorded, and just about every musician who worked in his studio, came from a poor, lower-class background, and there was a kind of crusading, evangelical spirit to the efforts he put into their careers. "I respected and loved their music," he said in 1978 of his artists, "and although my first love was always radio, my second was the freedom we tried to give the people, black and white, to express their very complex personalities, personalities these people didn't know existed in the fifties. I knew from nature, from childhood, that the poor white people felt they really couldn't play 'Who'd listen to me?' — and the blacks were even below that. I just hope I was a part of giving the influence to the people to be free in their expression."³⁴



Jerry Lee Lewis and his 13-year-old bride Myra in London, 27 May 1958, just after Lewis's English tour was cancelled. Photo courtesy Michael Ochs Archives

III

CONCLUSION

Memphis, Tennessee, gave the world the first supermarket (Piggly Wiggly) and the first successful chain of standardized motels (Holiday Inn). It also gave the world Elvis Presley, who more than any other figure popularized and personified rock-and-roll. It was and is a vital, often violent, usually unpredictable city, and the developments in popular music that took place there during the fifties were mostly sudden bursts of energy and flashes of intuition, not cautious, evolutionary developments as in New Orleans. In the New Orleans story, no single event stands out. The music developed over months and years, changing to accommodate the pop market when it had to but still retaining a strong sense of roots. In Memphis, Sam Phillips's sudden decision to stuff paper into a guitar amplifier during the recording of "Rocket '88" and the sudden creation of the Elvis Presley style in a moment of off-the-cuff studio banter, when Elvis launched into "That's All Right," are dramatic events that stand out like beacons.

It could hardly have been otherwise. New Orleans was old, socially stratified, and wise in the ways of the world when Memphis was still wilderness. Memphis's entire history is one of instability and casual violence. It was still new and more or less wide-open in the fifties, a place that was blending wildly divergent trends and traditions into an unpredictable, explosive mixture. In more concrete terms, New Orleans rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll was played by an established studio band; many of the musicians came from musical families, and at least some of them had jazz and even classical backgrounds. But the musicians who recorded for Sun combined in shifting aggregations; there was a studio group, but its personnel was fairly fluid, and many artists recorded with the bands they customarily performed with. Both the earlier black and the later white Sun artists and session musicians came from poor backgrounds and were by and large self-taught, or road-taught. They had traditions to live up to, but they were not as immersed in those traditions as the New Orleans men. They were interested in creating something new, and they did.

Rock-and-roll as we know it would not have developed without the New Orleans sound. New Orleans drummers like Earl Palmer, Cornelius Coleman, and Charles Williams defined



James Van Eaton, the Sun records session drummer who played on Jerry Lee Lewis's "Great Balls of Fire" and "Whole Lotta Shakin'" and other Memphis rock-and-roll hits, back in the studio drumming for former Sun artist Billy Lee Riley in 1978. Photo by Pat Rainer

the art of rock-and-roll percussion; the premier session drummer for Sun, James Van Eaton, listened to them incessantly.³⁵ Dave Bartholomew's band with its riffing saxophones, rolling piano, and heavy bass patterns was a model for early rock-and-roll bands the world over. During the crucial mid-fifties, when rock-and-roll's rowdy image was being attacked from all sides and Presley was being accused of encouraging teenage sex and juvenile delinquency, Fats Domino was reassuring the adults by recording standards like "My Blue Heaven" while keeping the kids dancing.

At the same time, Memphis furnished the spark that was needed. The first rock-and-roll hit, Bill Haley's "Shake, Rattle and Roll," and its follow-up, "Rock Around the Clock," were important musically, but as a performer Haley was not very exciting. For many white teen-agers, unadulterated black music — Little Richard, for example — might have been a little too exciting, at least at first. Chuck Berry combined visual flair with exceptional songwriting talent and a rhythmic guitar style. But Sam Phillips was right. The music needed a catalytic white artist to lend it at least some sort of legitimacy and to help accustom white teen-agers to the sounds and behavior of black performers. Elvis Presley was that artist. Along with Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis, he established rock-and-roll as an interracial phenomenon. The early white rock-and-rollers may have drawn attention away from some of rock-and-roll's black originators, but by recording black material and appearing in shows with black artists they also helped focus attention on these same originators. The barriers that had separated country, pop, and rhythm-and-blues and dictated separate musical styles for country and city musicians and listeners came tumbling down, and American popular music hasn't been the same since.

NOTES

(Most of the record albums cited below are available from the Down Home Music Co., 10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, California 94530.)

¹For a similar approach to jazz history, see Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978).

²Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (New Orleans: Robert L. Crager, 1958), p. 78.

³*Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴Reissued on *New Orleans R&B*, Volume Two, Flyright 4709.

⁵Reissued on Huey "Piano" Smith's *Rock & Roll Revival*, Ace 2021, and on the English Sue and Chiswick labels.

⁶Reissued on *This Is How It All Began*, Volume Two, Specialty/Sonet SNTF 5003.

⁷John Broven, *Walking to New Orleans* (Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex, England: Blues Unlimited, 1974), p. 31.

⁸Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1978), p. 261.

⁹The catalogue numbers and individual album titles are *The Fat Man*, UAS 30067; *Ain't That a Shame*, UAS 30068; *Blueberry Hill*, UAS 30069; *I'm Walkin'*, UAS 30099; *Walkin' to New Orleans*, UAS 30117; and *Let the Four Winds Blow*, UAS 30118.

¹⁰Particularly recommended are two albums on English United Artists: *The Smiley Lewis Story Vol. 1: The Bells are Ringing*, UAS 30186, and *The Smiley Lewis Story Vol. 2: I Hear You Knocking*, UAS 30167.

¹¹Little Richard's hits in their original versions (but unfortunately rechanneled in fake stereo) are available on a number of specialty albums.

¹²Larry Williams: *Original Hits*, Specialty/Sonet SNTF 5008.

¹³See note 5 for the relevant Huey Smith albums.

¹⁴Robert Palmer, "Professor Longhair's Rock and Roll Gumbo," *Downbeat*, 28 March 1974, pp. 18-19.

¹⁵Professor Longhair's early recordings have been reissued on *New Orleans Piano*, Atlantic SD 7225, and *New Orleans R&B*, Volume Two, Flyright 4709.

¹⁶Broven, p. 9.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Unfortunately these records are not available on reissues at present.

¹⁹Brown can be heard on two reissue albums, *Laughing But Crying*, Route 66 Kix-2, and *Good Rocking Tonight*, Route 66 Kix-6.

²⁰Kay Myracle, "Music in Memphis, 1880-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Memphis State University, 1975).

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 19.

²²These artists are well represented on numerous albums which have been reissued, including *Low Down Memphis Barrelhouse Blues*, Mamlish S-3803, *Frank Stokes: Creator of the Memphis Blues*, Yazoo L-1056, and *Cannon's Jug Stompers*, Herwin 208.

²³A representative sampling of early Delta blues is *Lonesome Road Blues: Fifteen Years in the Mississippi Delta 1926-1941*, Yazoo L-1038.

²⁴These and the other quotes by Phillips herein are excerpted from two interviews conducted by the writer in 1978. Some material from these interviews was published in "The Punks Have Only Rediscovered Rockabilly," *The New York Times*, 23 April 1978, pp. D19 and D25, and "Sam Phillips, the Sun King: A Revised History of Rock and Roll," *Memphis*, December 1978, pp. 32-44. Jackie Brenston's "Rocket '88'" has been reissued in *Genesis Volume 2: Memphis to Chicago*, English Chess 6641 125.

²⁵"Bear Cat" has been reissued on *The Blues Came Down from Memphis*, Charly CR 30125, "Feelin' Good," on *Sun-The Roots of Rock, Volume 7: Sun Blues*, Charly CR 30114.

²⁶Reissued on *Dr. Ross*, Arhoolie 1065.

²⁷Johnson can be heard on Howlin' Wolf's Memphis recordings, reissued on *The Legendary Sun Performers: Howlin' Wolf*, Charly CR 30134, and on several albums on the Chess, Kent, and United labels. The classic Pat Hare solo is on James Cotton's "Cotton Crop Blues," reissued on Charly CR 30125 and 30114.

²⁸They have been reissued on the Chess Genesis set mentioned above and on *The Great Original Recordings of Harmonica Frank*, Puritan 3003.

²⁹There are two versions of Presley's early days at Sun. The first is contained in Jerry Hopkins's *Elvis: a Biography*, and was pieced together with Marion Keisker's help but without cooperation from Phillips. The account in this monograph is based on the writer's interviews with Phillips.

³⁰An early, pirated take of "Blue Moon of Kentucky" is on the album *Good Rocking Tonight*, Bopcat LP-100.

³¹*Elvis: The Sun Sessions*, RCA APMI-1675.

³²Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins, *Catalyst: the Sun Records Story* (London: Aquarius Books, 1975), p. 31. "Blue Suede Shoes" and "Honey Don't" are available on several Charly albums, including *Rocking Guitar Man*, Charly CR 30003.

³³Slap-back echo is produced by running a sound through one or more additional tape machines, creating a slight delay; it is produced without an echo chamber. Many Sun veterans, however, have suggested that the shape of the room and particularly the high, scalloped ceiling also had an important effect on the "Sun sound." The best anthology of Jerry Lee Lewis's Sun recordings is *The Original Jerry Lee Lewis*, Charly CR 30111.

³⁴Phillips interviews (see note 24).

³⁵From the writer's unpublished interview with James Van Eaton, Memphis, 1978.

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